

## AN INSCRIPTION IN THE MONASTERY OF ST. CATHERINE AND THE MARTYR TRADITION IN SINAI

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AN attempt to clarify an abbreviated numeral in an inscription in the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai has raised several questions concerning the resolution of the abbreviation, the meaning of the inscription, and the character of the martyr tradition in Sinai. The text of the inscription has, of course, been known for many years, but only lately has it been reedited by Professor I. Ševčenko, the epigrapher of the Alexandria-Michigan-Princeton Archaeological Expedition to the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai.<sup>1</sup> The text is inscribed on a marble plaque located in the South Chapel of the monastery where, according to Professor Ševčenko, the slab protects "the relics of Sinai's Holy Fathers..., who rest in the basilica's South Chapel, a place often reserved for relics in the early churches of Syria."<sup>2</sup> The portion of the inscription relevant to this discussion reads:

† Τῆς δ̄ δεκάδος τὴν διὰ τοῦ αἵματος κο-  
λυμβήσαντες οἱ ἰσάριθμοι ὅσιοι  
π(ατέ)ρ(ε)ς | ἐνθάδε κατάκεινται κτλ.

According to Ševčenko, the text, "hitherto misunderstood, commemorates the 'four times ten' fathers (of Sinai) who had 'imitated the baptism by blood of an equal number of Martyrs.'" <sup>3</sup> Ševčenko derives the number "four times ten" or "forty" from *dekados*; and although, as he reported to me in a telephone conversation, he has no epigraphic analogue or parallel for "four times ten," he was led to the number by a historical—rather, a questionable historical—ac-

count, namely Ammonius' *Forty Martyrs of the Sinai Desert*.<sup>4</sup> Professor Ševčenko dates the inscription to the late sixth century and cites it as "an epigraphic *pendant* to literary fabrications" of that time.<sup>5</sup> He is led to this conclusion by the absence of a clear historical reference to forty martyrs who could have provided the model for the Sinaitic monks. He rules out the martyrdom of the forty at Sebaste on the grounds that they met their end by freezing to death on a lake and not by a baptism of blood.<sup>6</sup> The one reference to forty martyrs with a Sinaitic provenance is found in Ammonius' account, a description of two almost simultaneous attacks on the monks at Raithou and Mount Sinai, which resulted in the violent deaths of forty solitaries at each site.<sup>7</sup> Although the narrative claims to be an eyewitness account of attacks by Saracens and Blemmyes late in the fourth century, it is, according to R. Devreesse,<sup>8</sup> of a late date and unreliable for the early history of Sinai. Professor Ševčenko, relying on the conclusions of Devreesse, cites the Ammonius narrative as having been "composed—perhaps by some learned Sinaitic monk—toward the end of the sixth century"; hence his view of the inscription as "an epigraphic *pendant* to literary fabrications undertaken roughly at the same time

<sup>4</sup> Forsyth and Weitzmann, *op. cit.*, 20; Ševčenko, *op. cit.*, 258.

<sup>5</sup> Forsyth and Weitzmann, *loc. cit.*; Ševčenko, *loc. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Ševčenko, *loc. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> The Greek text, *Ammoniou monachou logos*, in *Illustrium Christi martyrum lecti triumphi*, ed. F. Combeffis (Paris, 1660), 88–132; a Syriac text, dated to the seventh century, and English translation in *The Forty Martyrs of the Sinai Desert*, trans. A. S. Lewis, *Horae Semiticae*, IX (Cambridge, 1912), 1–14 (English), 2–53 (Syriac).

<sup>8</sup> "Le christianisme dans la péninsule sinaïtique, des origines à l'arrivée des musulmans," *RBibl*, 49 (1940), 219.

<sup>1</sup> I. Ševčenko, "The Early Period of the Sinai Monastery in the Light of its Inscriptions," *DOP*, 20 (1966), 258, 263. See also summary in G. H. Forsyth and K. Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai. The Church and Fortress of Justinian* (Ann Arbor [1973], 20, pl. cii, d.

<sup>2</sup> Ševčenko, *op. cit.*, 258.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

in order to provide the newly founded monastery—or at least its site—with martyrs of its own.”<sup>9</sup>

Leaving aside for the moment the resolution of the abbreviated numeral in the inscription, Professor Ševčenko’s conclusions could lead us to believe (a) that there were no martyrs in Sinai—that is, martyrdom achieved by falling victim to violence at the hands of non-Christians, in this case Bedouins, whether called Agareni, Saracens, or Blemmyes; and (b) that the Ammonius narrative was composed prior to the time that the inscription was put in place in the South Chapel. For the latter, there is simply no evidence whatsoever, other than Ševčenko’s assumption that the inscription bears a number taken from the Ammonius narrative or from other fictional narratives, to prove that the narrative preceded the inscription. As for the matter of martyrdom, there is reasonably sound evidence of Bedouin attacks on the eremitic communities on and around Mount Sinai from the fourth century on.<sup>10</sup> Even Devreesse, upon whom Ševčenko relies for an appreciation of the Ammonius narrative, states that many of the details in the account were “fabricated toward the end of the sixth century by learned monks of Sinai to give a sensational context to a bloody incursion or to a massacre of peninsular monks unexpectedly occurring on a certain January 14th; the number of forty martyrs—eighty on an exact count—could even have been borrowed from another literary source.”<sup>11</sup> To this we can add the “Nilus” *Narrationes*, which were most likely composed at an earlier date (late fourth or early fifth century) than the Ammonius narrative, and which, although treated as a piece of pious fiction with regard to the abduction and recovery of a certain Theodoulos, preserve the historical reminiscence of the massacre of a number of Sinaitic monks and solitaries at the hands of Bedouins.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ševčenko, *op. cit.*, 258.

<sup>10</sup> P. Mayerson, “The Desert of Southern Palestine according to Byzantine Sources,” *PAPS*, 107 (April, 1963), 161–62.

<sup>11</sup> Devreesse, *op. cit.*, 219–20.

<sup>12</sup> Mayerson, *op. cit.*, 160–72. See also *idem*, “Observations on the ‘Nilus’ *Narrationes*,” *JARCE*, 12 (1975), 51–74.

If the inscription in the South Chapel refers to those who imitated forty martyrs, who could the original forty have been? There are two possibilities. One, of course, is the forty of Sebaste; the other is the forty martyrs of Palestine, the most distinguished of whom was Silvanus, the bishop of the churches around Gaza, who at an earlier stage in his career had spent some time as a solitary on Mount Sinai.<sup>13</sup> It would seem plausible, therefore, that the forty martyrs from Palestine, who had indeed suffered martyrdom by a baptism of blood—they were beheaded—would, by their proximity to Sinai and by Silvanus’ association with the region, have provided the model for the martyrs mentioned in the inscription. But, however plausible these forty might be, their martyrdom does not seem to have created a lasting tradition. If it had not been for Eusebius’ mention of them, they might have been lost to history.

We are on far surer ground with the forty from Sebaste. We need not be deterred, as was Ševčenko, by the fact that these martyrs died by freezing to death and not by some form of violence; death by any means in the unrelenting pursuit of the Christian faith merits the accolade of “baptized by blood,” a glory greater than that of “baptism by water.”<sup>14</sup> Basil of Caesarea, who delivered a homily in a church erected in honor of these victims of Licinian repression, adds several other interesting details, including a “baptism by blood.” He tells the story of one of the guards who, when one of the forty weakened in his faith, cried out that he was a Christian, and rushed out on the ice to take the place of the apostate, and thus

<sup>13</sup> Sozomenus, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI, 32.8; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, VIII, 13.5. Although Eusebius speaks here of “forty save one,” the number becomes simply “forty” in his *History of the Martyrs of Palestine*, XIII, 11. See Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History and the Martyrs of Palestine*, ed. H. J. Lawlor and J. E. L. Oulton, I (London, 1927), 399 (long recension), and Eusebius, *History of the Martyrs in Palestine*, ed. and trans. from the Syriac by W. Cureton (London, 1861), 48.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., “Baptism by Blood,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. J. Hastings, II (New York, 1955), 411–12.

"filled out the number [of forty]." <sup>15</sup> Of this martyr, Basil goes on to say: "He was baptized into Him, not by another, but by his own faith, not in water but in his own blood." <sup>16</sup> He adds further that the forty were burned while their stiffened bodies still showed signs of life. Within a fairly short period of time, relics and legends of the Forty of Sebaste increased in number, and churches in their name proliferated in both the East and the West. <sup>17</sup>

In Sinai itself, the evidence for the tradition of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste is quite secure. The library of the Monastery of St. Catherine contains at least four accounts of their martyrdom. Although all of these are in the Arabic collection and date between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, they are undoubtedly translations from Greek accounts of an earlier date. <sup>18</sup> Further, we have some more tangible evidence from a location near the monastery itself. In the Wadi Leja, at the foot of Mount Sinai, is a structure called Deir el Arbain, "The Monastery of the Forty." According to E. H. Palmer, it was used in his time as a resting place for the night by pilgrims who had ascended Mount Sinai and were preparing for the ascent of Mount St. Katherine on the following day. <sup>19</sup> S. C. Bartlett describes the spring and the rather extensive gardens surrounding the old monastery, but states that the building itself was small, its interior measuring only about twenty-two

by sixteen feet in front of the chancel. <sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, we have no information on the date of the construction of the monastery or on the date it was given the name of Deir el Arbain.

Having confirmed the existence of the tradition of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste in Sinai, and, further, taking into account the biblical associations with the number forty and its significance for the residents of a monastery in Sinai, we can easily appreciate the influences which led Ammonius to fix upon the number forty for the martyrs at Raithou and Mount Sinai. The influence of the number forty in this narrative, however, does not prove that the inscription in the South Chapel is "an epigraphic *pendant*" to a literary fabrication.

Let us now return to this inscription. As stated above, Ševčenko would translate *ḏ dekados* as "four times ten" and would relate the number to the forty martyrs cited in the Ammonius narrative or in some other unknown literary fabrication. I take a contrary view. I do not believe that the number can be supported either by other citations or by the normal expectation of anyone reading it as an equivalent of the number forty. In my view, one should read *ḏ dekados* simply as "fourteen" in the genitive case (*tessares kai dekados* or *tessareskaidekados*), *ḏ* being the common abbreviation for the number four. The task before us is to find some explanation for the use of the number fourteen in the inscription even though it may present some difficulty in interpretation.

If we examine the martyr tradition of Sinai, one incident of violence and suffering—and only one—etched itself deeply into the memory of the early Christian inhabitants of that remote region: a Bedouin raid on January 14 which took the lives of a number of monks and solitaires on and around the Holy Mountain. The year cannot be pinpointed—it seems to have been sometime between 373 and 410 <sup>21</sup>—but the date of

<sup>15</sup> *Homilia in Quadraginta Martyres*, PG, 31, cols. 520–21. (Gregory of Nyssa also delivered three orations on the Forty of Sebaste, in PG, 46, cols. 749–88.)

<sup>16</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., "Forty Martyrs," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, VI, ed. C. G. Herbermann et al. (New York, 1909), 153. For a legendary account of the discovery of the relics of the Forty in Constantinople, see Sozomenus, *Ecclesiastical History*, IX, 2.

<sup>18</sup> M. Kamil, *Catalogue of All Manuscripts in the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai* (Wiesbaden, 1970), 44–50, nos. 527, 537, 569, 574. Other references to this famous martyrdom are possibly to be found in the historical accounts, homilies, and martyrdoms in the Greek and Arabic collections which are not specifically catalogued as "The Forty Martyrs of Sebaste."

<sup>19</sup> *The Desert of the Exodus*, I (London, 1871), 119.

<sup>20</sup> S. C. Bartlett, *From Egypt to Palestine* (New York, 1879), 276–77. The frontispiece in Lewis, *op. cit.* (*supra*, note 7), is an illustration of the ruined Monastery of the Forty.

<sup>21</sup> Mayerson, "The Desert of Southern Palestine," 161–62 and note 11.

January 14 became firmly fixed in tradition. The exact number of martyrs, on the other hand, apparently did not become part of that tradition.

At this point we must return to the two narratives which, however much deprecated as historical sources, have a Sinaitic provenance and concern that one Bedouin *razzia*. That of "Nilus," in all probability the earlier of the two, recounts with considerable verbal flourishes and breast-beating the sudden attack by barbarous Bedouins, the abduction of Theodoulos, and the bloody slaughter of several monks and solitaires.<sup>22</sup> After mentioning the names of three who were killed in that attack, the writer of the narrative then states: "They died on the seventh day after the Epiphany, which is the 14th of January. Pious men are very interested in learning the time and the names, since they want to check this information with the memories of holy men. Others were killed some years before, the memory of whom they celebrate on the same day because of the length of the journey and the size of the assemblage."<sup>23</sup> The Ammonius narrative places the date of the celebrated raid and double massacre on the second of Tybi, according to the Egyptian calendar, which would convert to the 28th of December. The Greek text, however, reveals how firmly set was the date of January 14, since the writer makes the following statement: "These Holy Fathers and victorious men of Christ died on the 2nd of the month of Tybi at about the ninth hour; according to the Romans, their memory is celebrated on the 14th of the month of January."<sup>24</sup> The "Nilus"

and Ammonius accounts were the two prime and perhaps the only sources from which the compilers of Greek menologies and synaxaria excerpted both the dramatic details and the date of January 14 to commemorate, possibly with a Eucharist and a sermon, the Holy Fathers who were killed at Sinai and Raithou.<sup>25</sup> Admittedly, there are differences in dating the massacre which I believe may be attributable either to dating by the Egyptian calendar (i.e., Tybi 2) or to miscalculating the number of days after the Epiphany, the formula that seems to have been used. As to the latter, the date is cited either as the seventh (as in the "Nilus" narrative) or the eighth day after the Epiphany, which would place the date at January 13 or 14.<sup>26</sup> In the course of time, however, January 14 became the fixed date for the anniversary of the Sinaitic martyrs, so much so that a current calendar of the Greek Orthodox Church carries this notation under the date of January 14: "Fathers Killed in Sinai and Raitho."<sup>27</sup>

It is my opinion, then, that January 14 was a red-letter day in Sinai, and that the inscription in the South Chapel of the Monastery of St. Catherine had only to use the number 14 to communicate to the monks of the monastery a well-known event in the ecclesiastical history of Sinai. Citing it as such is a form of synecdoche which is commonly employed when a numeral has a clear and unambiguous association, such as the Pentecost, the Lenten Quadregesima, Shabuoth, or the Fourth (of July). To the inhabitants of the Monastery of St. Catherine, the *ἡ δεκάδος* of the inscription marked that tragic day of January 14 which saw the death of an unknown number of monks and solitaires at the hands of Bedouin

<sup>22</sup> The full account of the "Nilus" *Narrationes*, in PG, 79, cols. 589–693. It is generally agreed that the writer of the *Narrationes* is not Nilus of Ancyra, although the narrative appears under his name; hence the quotation marks.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 640C. In "Observations" (*supra*, note 12), 73, note 45, I have raised the question of the place of this quotation in the narrative.

<sup>24</sup> Ed. Combefis, *op. cit.* (*supra*, note 7), 129. The Syriac version apparently dates the martyrdom according to the Egyptian calendar. It should be noted that the following statement is placed, unlike that of the Greek text, as a kind of coda to the narrative (Lewis, *op. cit.* [*supra*, note 7], 14): "The life of the Holy Fathers who were slain at Mount Sinai and

Raitho, is finished, in the days of Pope Peter of Alexandria. But the memory of these holy ones is made in December in the months of the Romans, the 28th."

<sup>25</sup> PG, 79, cols. 25–26, 31, 663–65, 692–93; *Synaxarium CP*, cols. 389–91.

<sup>26</sup> See especially *Le calendrier Palestino-Géorgien du Sinaiticus 34 (Xe siècle)*, ed. and trans. G. Garitte (Brussels, 1958), 129–30, 420.

<sup>27</sup> The 1975 calendar from SS. Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Church of West Nyack, New York.

raiders. The South Chapel itself was apparently dedicated to, or contains the relics of, those who at a later date (sixth century?) achieved martyrdom by falling victims to periodic Bedouin violence. I would, therefore, translate the full inscription as follows:

† Τῆς δ̅ δεκάδος τὴν διὰ τοῦ αἵματος κο-  
λυμβήθραν ζηλώσαντες οἱ ἰσάριθμοι ὅσοι  
π(ατέ)ρ(ε)ς | ἐνθάδε κατὰκινται, ὧν ἡ  
εὐφροσύνη ἡ βᾶτος ἡ ἀληθινή ὑπάρχει·  
δι' ὧν ὁ θ(εὸ)ς σῶσον ἡμᾶς †

"The Holy Fathers lie here, equal in number<sup>28</sup> to those who were killed on the [14th of January], and imitating them through a baptism of blood. Theirs is the joyous and true Burning Bush;<sup>29</sup> through them, O God, save us."

<sup>28</sup> "Equal in number" (*isarithmoi*) perhaps expresses the uncertainty—it is a vague enough expression—over the exact number of martyrs who fell on January 14.

<sup>29</sup> "Burning Bush" (*batos*) has a wide range of symbolic meanings; see entry in *A Patristic Greek Lexikon*, ed. G. W. E. Lampe (Oxford, 1961), 294.